

# IS IT REALLY WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE? A LOOK AT EARLY VP ELLIPSIS IN EUROPEAN PORTUGUESE

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims at showing that the study of VP ellipsis (VPE) provides evidence of very early convergence between the child and the adult grammar. It will be shown that children spontaneously produce VP ellipsis before 3 years old, at a stage in which their MLUw is particularly low. It will also be argued that early apparent VP ellipsis is true adult VP ellipsis (alternative accounts make wrong predictions, as a comparison with the acquisition of French will show, or create relevant learnability problems).

## 2. Two reasons to study the acquisition of VP ellipsis

I will start by stating why the acquisition of VPE may be an interesting research topic.

First, it is generally agreed that VPE is licensed when there is a stranded verb in a projection in the inflectional domain, c-commanding the VP (Lobeck, 1995). This explains why in English only auxiliaries or the copula, which are the verbs that occur in I, license VPE, whereas in Portuguese, a language in which all verbs raise to I, all verbs license VPE (see Matos 1992). Therefore, VPE means V-to-I movement, and is also evidence of the presence of functional projections above the VP.

Secondly, even though classic studies on VPE assume that the identification of the elided material is constrained by a morpho-syntactic parallelism restriction, this restriction has recently been redefined in semantic and discourse terms. Merchant (2001) suggests that elided material obeys a e-givenness restriction, which includes a givenness restriction (saying that elided material must be given, a restriction

common to deaccenting contexts). To this extent, VPE means ability to deal with the information structure notion of givenness and ability to operate in the syntax – discourse interface (this is indeed suggested by Wijnen, Roeper & van der Meulen 2004 and Wijnen & Roeper 2005).

### 3. Previous research on the acquisition of VP ellipsis

Previous research on the acquisition of ellipsis indicates that children as young as 3 years old are able to comprehend and produce VPE (Postman et al. 1997, Thornton & Wexler 1999, Foley et al. 2003, Matsuo & Duffield, 2001, Matsuo, 2007). The only exception is Grodzinsky (2005), who suggests that children may not have adult comprehension of VPE.

However, the results of preceding research are restricted to the study of VPE in coordination contexts and come mostly from experimental studies. Moreover, the children tested are generally not younger than 3 years old.

### 4. Early spontaneous production of VP ellipsis

EP offers the possibility to explore spontaneous production of VPE at a stage in which children still do not produce the coordination contexts in which we usually find VPE. This happens because in EP VPE very frequently occurs in the context of verbal answers to yes no questions (see Matos 1992 and Martins 1994 for a VPE analysis of verbal answers). As it happens with VPE in EP, verbal answers may be licensed by an auxiliary (as in 1) or by a main verb (as in 2). Other possible affirmative answers are *sim* ‘yes’ or *é* ‘is’, *foi / era* ‘was’ – I call this last type of answer a SER (BE) answer since it is built with a frozen form of the verb *to be*.

- (1) Q: Tens                    lido        o            jornal?  
have[2sg]                read    the        newspaper  
‘Have you been reading the newspaper?’  
A: Tenho. - Verbal answer (VPE context)  
have[1sg]  
‘Yes.’
- (2) Q: Deste o jornal            ao            professor na            biblioteca?  
gave the newspaper    to+the    teacher    at+the library  
‘Did you give the newspaper to the teacher at the library?’  
A: Dei. - Verbal answer (VPE)  
gave[1sg]  
‘Yes.’

Answers to yes-no questions are very frequent contexts in spontaneous interaction. Therefore, a spontaneous production corpus, representative of the spontaneous production of three children acquiring EP, was considered. The data were transcribed using the CHAT format (MacWhinney 2000). Each file corresponds to the transcription of one session of videotaping (45-50 minutes of recording) – see Table 1 (more details are presented in Santos 2006).

| Child             | Age             | MLUw          | Number of files | Number of child's utterances |
|-------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| Inês <sup>1</sup> | 1;6.6 – 3;11.12 | 1.527 – 3.815 | 21              | 6591                         |
| Tomás             | 1;6.18 – 2;9.7  | 1.286 – 2.954 | 16              | 6800                         |
| InêsM.            | 1;5.9 – 2;7.24  | 1.315 – 2.370 | 15              | 5101                         |

Table 1 – Spontaneous production corpus

The analysis of this spontaneous production corpus shows that children produce verbal answers from the earliest stages of language acquisition.

However, EP displays not only VPE, but also null object (a case in which a direct object is omitted, see Raposo 1986) and null complement anaphora (a case in which a sentential internal argument is omitted, see Cyrino & Matos, 2006). Since main verbs license VPE, all verbal answers may be derived through VPE, even though a subset of those answers involving a main verb may be ambiguous between VPE and null object or VPE and null complement anaphora. So what we are interested at is the rate of unambiguous VPE cases.

The analysis of the corpus shows that verbal answers that correspond to unambiguous VPE cases are found in the earliest files (MLUw at or below 2.0). These are cases in which VPE is licensed by an auxiliary (as in 3), by a copula verb (as in 4), as well as cases in which more than an internal argument is omitted or cases in which a VP modifier is omitted (see Santos 2006 for arguments showing that these are unambiguous VPE cases).

(3) MAE: estás lhe a dar colo?  
 are CL-DAT PREP give lap  
 'Are you putting him in your lap?'

INI: (es)tou.  
 am  
 'Yes.'

Inês 2;1.10

- (4) MAE: olha # são legos?  
look are Lego  
'Look, are these Lego pieces?'  
TOM: são.  
are  
'Yes.' Tomás 1;8.16

Unambiguous VPE cases correspond to 20.6% (218 out of 1060 verbal answers) if all verbal answers are included; they correspond to 43.7% (218 out of 499) if we exclude question – answer contexts such as (5). The answers like the one in (5) are ambiguous because they involve the forms *é* 'is', *foi / era* 'was' of the verb 'to be', which may also occur as *ser* 'be' answers (see section 4, the comment to the examples 1 and 2).

- (5) ALS: é o cão?  
is the dog  
'Is it the dog?'  
INM: é.  
is  
'Yes.' Inês M. 1;10.16

Given these results, it seems that there is enough evidence that children produce what looks like VPE at the first stages of multiword production. If this is true, this is evidence that (i) children move the verb to an inflectional domain in these very early stages; (ii) children have already determined that their language licenses VPE, what may mean to set a parameter (see Matos 1992 for a formulation of this parameter) or to acquire a feature (Merchant 2001); (iii) children are able to operate at the syntax – discourse interface, specifically they are able to determine in what particular discourse conditions VPE is possible.

### 5. Is early (apparent) VP ellipsis really adult-like?

The facts presented in the last section suggest that children converge with the adult grammar of their language in the sense that they are able to produce VPE. However, they raise several other questions. One of them is obvious: is what looks like VPE true (i.e. adult) VPE?

Most researchers now agree that VPE is a fully projected VP which is deleted (see Hankamer & Sag, 1976 and subsequent work). This explains why it is possible to have extraction from an ellipsis site (Haik 1987), as in (6):

- (6) Eu tinha convidado algumas pessoas da família,  
 I had invited some people PREP+the family  
 mas quem<sub>i</sub> é que tu tinhas [~~convidado-t<sub>i</sub>]~~?  
 but who is that you had invited  
 ‘I had invited some people from my family, but who did you invite?’

So, if nothing else is said, we may think that, when the child produces a verbal answer / VPE, he is projecting all the structure in the VP (see the simplified representation in 7b):

- (7)a. MAE: vamos fazer legos ?  
 go[1pl] do lego  
 ‘Shall we play with Lego?’  
 TOM: **vamos** . Tomás 1;6.18  
 go[1pl]

- b. [<sub>IP</sub> *pro* [<sub>I</sub> vamos<sub>i</sub>] ... [<sub>VP</sub> ~~t<sub>i</sub> ... [<sub>VP</sub> fazer legos ]]]~~

However, the analysis of the spontaneous production corpus shows a mismatch between the first deleted VPs and the first corresponding overt VPs. For instance, even though Inês M. produces a verbal answer with the auxiliary *ir* ‘go’ at 1;5.30, she produces an overt structure with the same auxiliary only at 2;2.18. The same child produces an elided VP with an omitted *que* ‘that’ complement clause at 1;5.9 but she only produces an overt corresponding structure at 2;6.19. Thus, what can we assume to be the structure of early verbal answers?

First, it is important to establish that, to produce adult VPE, the child does not need to project the adult VP structure. Producing adult VPE means that a VP is projected, a verb is raised from its VP internal position to a projection c-commanding the VP and, finally, the VP is deleted if certain discourse conditions are met. So the child may possibly project a truncated structure when dealing with more complex structures such as embedded complement clauses.

But we should explain why these truncated structures do not overtly occur in the earliest files (the MLUw is below 2). I would like to draw a parallel between this discussion and the discussion concerning early null subjects. Therefore, I will evaluate two different types of extra-grammatical accounts of early VPE, an alternative grammatical account and, finally, I will argue for a mixed account along the lines of Rizzi’s (2005) analysis of early null subjects (see Santos 2006 for a more detailed discussion).

In fact, we could think that what looks like VPE is not ellipsis but VP drop due to processing limitations (see Bloom 1990 or Valian 1991 approach to early null subjects in language acquisition). In this case, this VP drop would not be constrained by grammar.

Another extra-grammatical approach could instead say that early apparent VPE is VP drop guided not by grammatical principles but instead by discourse principles. Greenfield & Smith (1976) suggest that children omit material that is less informative, i.e. material that can be recovered from preceding discourse, and we know that ellipsis is subject to a givenness requirement (see Merchant's 2001 approach, section 2). So we could hypothesize that early apparent VPE is mere drop of given material and that it is unrelated to the acquisition of VPE in the target grammar. In this case, we would maintain that children have discourse competence but we would not be assuming any specific syntactic competence.

Of course, these possible accounts make a prediction: children should produce what would look like VPE, in the early stages of acquisition of all languages, i.e. also when acquiring languages that do not display VPE. French is one of those languages: it does not have VPE, although it has null complement anaphora (see Emonds 1978, Depiante 2000).

To test the prediction made by extra-grammatical accounts, I analyzed the York corpus (De Cat & Plunkett, 2002; Plunkett, 2002), available in the Childes database (MacWhinney, 2000). Since it is known that there is clitic omission in the early stages of acquisition of French (see the overview in Pérez-Leroux & Pirvulescu, 2005), contexts where a main verb could occur stranded with a null complement were not considered. Instead, a "Kwal" search was performed for the *Présent*, *Futur*, *Imparfait* and *Conditionnel* forms of the verbs *avoir* 'have', *être* 'be' and *aller* 'go', i.e. auxiliaries and copula verbs. All the contexts were classified by hand and the final results checked with a native speaker of French. Interruptions marked as such were disregarded. The analysis shows that children acquiring French do not produce what may look like VPE. There are two problematic cases, which may have alternative explanations.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in the following case, it could be that the child's sentence is an attempt to say *il (n') (en) a pas* 'he doesn't have that', with a clitic omission.

- |          |                         |          |             |     |        |
|----------|-------------------------|----------|-------------|-----|--------|
| (8) MOT: | il                      | a        | perdu       | sa  | tête ? |
|          | he                      | has      | lost        | his | head   |
|          | 'Did he lose his head?' |          |             |     |        |
| ANN:     | <i>il (n')</i>          | <i>a</i> | <i>pas.</i> |     |        |
|          | he NEG                  | has      | NEG         |     |        |

- MOT: il a perdu sa tête, le petit ours?  
 he has lost his head the little bear  
 ‘Did the little bear lose his head?’
- ANN: xx.
- ANN: il est cassé.  
 he is broken  
 ‘He is broken.’
- MOT: il est cassé.  
 he is broken  
 ‘He is broken.’ Anne 2 ;2.20 (from file para009, line 703)

But let us consider another approach of early VPE that assumes a non-adult analysis. It could be that children, in first stages of language acquisition, produce VPE as a *pro* and not as a structured VP that gets deleted. This is a problematic approach, however.

In fact, EP is a language with null complement anaphora (as in 8), which is analyzed as a *pro* in complement position and is licensed by a subset of main and modal verbs (see Depiante, 2000, also Santos 2006 for Portuguese).<sup>3</sup> In (8) the passive / active contrast between the antecedent and the omitted material makes it clear that it cannot be a case of VPE.

- (8) A sopa deve ser comida com ervas, mas a Teresa não pode [-].  
 the soup must be eaten with herbs but the Teresa NEG can  
 ‘The soup must be eaten with herbs but Teresa cannot do it.’  
 [-] = eat the soup with herbs

So, in this case, if children start by assuming that VPE is derived as a *pro* in complement position and if VPE is licensed by all verbs in EP, we would run into a classic learnability problem: how could the child move from a superset (all verbs license *pro*) to a subset (some verbs license *pro*)? In fact, in the adult grammar, only some verbs license null complement anaphora.

If starting with a *pro* analysis, the child may discover that all verbs license deletion of a VP, on the basis of positive evidence (such as extraction from ellipsis sites – see 6). However, no positive evidence is available as a clue that not all verbs license a *pro* complement (null complement anaphora): the child could never discover that a sentence such as (9) is not possible because auxiliaries do not license null complement anaphora – again, the passive / active contrast between the antecedent and the omission site makes it clear that this could not be derived as VPE (see Santos 2006 for a detailed discussion).

- (9) \*Os dossiers têm de ser organizados  
 the files must be organized  
 mas o João não tem *pro*.  
 but the João NEG has  
*pro* = organizado os dossiers.  
           organized the files  
 ‘\*The files must be organized but João has not.’

As an alternative, I suggest that the mismatch between first overt and first deleted VPs may be explained along the lines of Rizzi’s (2005) account of early null subjects: eliding a VP may be less complex for the child’s immature performance system than spelling it out; but it is only possible for children to elide a VP if this is a possibility in their grammar. This is a performance *and* grammatical account and it crucially maintains that early VPE is evidence of convergence with the adult grammar.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the spontaneous production of children acquiring European Portuguese provides evidence that children produce VPE in very early stages of language acquisition (MLUw around 2). This means that these children have the syntactic knowledge necessary to license VPE (V-to-I raising, parameter or feature involved in determining whether the language has VPE, see Matos 1992 and Merchant 2001), but it also means that they can deal with a restriction on VP ellipsis which is defined in semantic and discourse terms (a restriction involving the notion of givenness, Merchant 2001).

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### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Cécile de Cat for discussing these cases.

<sup>3</sup> For an approach to null complement anaphora that is different from Depiante (2000) or Santos (2006), see Cyrino & Matos (2006).

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